

ORAL TESTIMONY
JEFFREY W. RUNGE, M.D., ADMINISTRATOR, NATIONAL
HIGHWAY TRAFFIC SAFETY ADMINISTRATION, BEFORE THE
MISSOURI HOUSE TRANSPORTATION AND MOTOR VEHICLE
COMMITTEE ON THE MERITS OF HOUSE BILL 1200

February 11, 2004

Good afternoon. My name is Dr. Jeff Runge. I am the Administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration--also known as NHTSA--an agency of the U.S. Department of Transportation.

I would like to thank Representative Rob Schaaf for inviting me to testify on House Bill 1200. This legislation, if enacted, will save the lives of nearly 90 people in Missouri in the first year.

In 2001, President Bush appointed me to head NHTSA, the agency charged with reducing the devastating toll that traffic crashes take each year in our country. We do this by regulating the automotive industry and by careful scientific analysis showing where the fatality problems are and how to address them.

Traffic crashes killed nearly 43,000 people and caused about 3 million injuries in 2002. Largely preventable...these injuries not only impact the **lives and livelihood** of the crash victims and their families...but also cost the Nation about \$230 billion each year in medical expense, lost productivity, property damage, and related costs.

Missouri pays more than \$4.7 billion of these costs each year. That is nearly \$850 for every resident of your State, each year. And 75% of that cost is paid by citizens who **not involved** in the crashes.

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death of children in Missouri--indeed in all of America--and for adults to age 34.

Our data clearly show that upgrading Missouri's safety belt law from secondary to primary enforcement is the most effective way for Missouri to reduce traffic deaths, injuries, and their costs...more than vehicle improvements...more than road and intersection improvements...more than any other piece of legislation you might consider.

The Bush Administration recognizes that there are those who have a philosophical argument against government mandates. But we clearly have the need for science-based traffic laws to protect our citizens and blunt the economic effects. Our Administration cannot condone sacrificing the lives of our citizens at the altar of political philosophy. This law you are considering is about our core value of human life. In Missouri, that's a savings of 89 human lives in the first year. Moreover, these lives are disproportionately young and disproportionately rural.

Your Department of Transportation Office of Highway Safety, Highway Patrol, and Law Enforcement Traffic Safety Advisory Council are doing the best they can with a secondary law. They have increased use by about 12 percentage points since 1999, to 73% in 2003. But they need the same tools as your neighboring States of Iowa and Illinois.

Even with their hard work, Missouri's safety belt use rate is still well below the national average of 79%. More than a quarter of your State's population--about 1.5 million people--are still not buckling up.

By comparison to your 73% use rate, your neighboring States with primary safety belt laws, Iowa and Illinois, have use rates of 86% and 80% respectively.

If Missouri enacts HB 1200, and attains the predicted increase in safety belt use, you will not only save 89 lives, but you will also prevent 1,050 serious injuries clogging your trauma centers, and save \$217 million in costs each year.

Missouri's rural communities are most at risk. Nearly 70% of your State's traffic deaths occur in rural areas, and the fatality rate per vehicle mile is nearly 3 times higher in rural Missouri than in urban communities.

In 2002 (single year), 995 people died while riding in cars and trucks in Missouri. Of these, 707 (71%) died while not wearing their safety belts. If those people had been belted, 350 would be alive and well today. Of the 995 who died in cars and trucks, 305 were between 14 to 24 years of age. 82% (249) of these young occupants were not wearing safety belts. If these young people had been belted, about 125 would be with their families today.

As we examine the problem closely, other grave statistics emerge. Again thinking about rural Missouri where pickup trucks predominate--230 (of the 995) were pickup truck deaths, 81% were unbelted. The proportion unbelted is even higher among 14-24 year old pickup truck fatalities, with 91% being unbelted.

Our studies and our experience make it clear that young people do not respond to isolated educational messages about belt use, but they do change their habits with the threat of a ticket and fine.

Most of the business community also understands and supports primary laws. Unbelted motorists are a burden on your State's employers. A recent NHTSA study of 1998-2000 data shows that motor vehicle crashes--both on and off the job--cost employers \$60 billion each year. More than \$6 billion of this total is due to nonuse of safety belts.

This occurs because of lost work time, lower productivity due to injury and replacement employees, and provision of increasingly expensive health insurance.

Here in Missouri, crashes cost employers more than \$800 million annually. That amounts to \$310 per employee in the State. In an era of dwindling corporate resources, reducing the costs...however we can...is good government.

In addition to saving money, HB 1200 could earn a lot of money for Missouri. The President's Highway Bill, SAFETEA--now pending before Congress--would entitle the State to an incentive grant of over \$17 million, if it upgrades its belt law to primary enforcement or reaches 90% belt use. To date, no State has come close to 90% without a primary law.

While my boss, Secretary Norman Mineta, continually reminds me that safety is our number one priority, he also asked me to ensure that enactment of primary safety belt laws does not result in racial profiling. The Secretary has a deep understanding of what it means to be singled out by race and understands why racial profiling has no place in our society. He also understands that a primary safety belt law has not, and will not, lead to racial profiling. And he is not alone.

A list of supporting organizations appears on page 3 of my written testimony.

Prior to coming to Washington, D.C., to serve in the Administration, I spent 20 years practicing emergency medicine, where I treated literally thousands of injured people after car and truck crashes. Most of the seriously injured patients were in my emergency department simply because they failed to wear their safety belt.

Even in low velocity crashes, you are safer wearing your safety belt. Considering all types of crashes, safety belts cut your risk of death in half. And in rollover crashes, safety belts reduce the risk of death by 80%, meaning 4 out of 5 unbelted rollover deaths would not have happened if the occupants had been belted.

Finally, enactment of HB 1200 will also save the lives of children. Our research shows that when the driver buckles up, 92% of the time the children in the vehicle are wearing belts or in child safety seats. However, when the driver is not wearing a safety belt, only 62% of the kids are wearing belts or in safety seats.

As legislators, you can do what we trauma and emergency physicians cannot. We all think about it each time we make the long walk down the hallway to tell families their loved ones will never come home. We know we will hear the words “if only.”

You have the power to turn “if only he’d worn his safety belt” into “thank God he was wearing his safety belt.” Every physician and every family of a crash victim wishes they could have prevented that tragedy.

You have the power, and hopefully the discretion, to make it happen.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would be glad to answer any questions.